Going where the grass is greener: China Kazaks and the *Oralman* immigration policy in Kazakhstan

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This paper discusses the quiet exodus of Kazaks, especially nomadic herders, from China to Kazakhstan. In contrast to the dominant Chinese worldview that ethnic minorities are 'backward' and need sedentarization, among other policies, to enjoy development, Kazaks have other ideas. Heeding the beckoning call of the 'oralman' *immigration programme, Kazaks are packing their yurts and applying for exit visas. Using perspectives taken from interviews with families in two Xinjiang prefectures, it is clear that Kazakhstan represents the 'grass is greener' option for families in the literal sense. Governmental responses support the migration, while demographic realities and policy warp the mirage of a better future. This paper examines the facts and the projections of a glorious Kazakh nation under construction to understand how a nationalist agenda and environmental distress contribute to everyday choices about sheep, grass and where to call home.*

Keywords: China Kazaks, nomads, migration, emigration, sustainability, development

Introduction

Kazaks and other ethnic groups in China are gaining an increasing amount of attention in recent years as they strive to assert their identities and cultures as separate and distinct from the majority Han population. The Kazaks, who number some 1.1 million people in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, the vast region comprising one-sixth of China's territory and located in the north-west, adjacent to Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia and five other nations, have a strong identification with a nomadic past. In Xinjiang, Kazaks live in Urumqi and other cities, and are found dispersed mainly across the northern prefectures of Yili, Tacheng and Altai. As elsewhere for nomadic peoples, the trend in Xinjiang is towards settlement in towns and urban centres. Research shows pastoral Kazaks in China face a crisis in the modern era unparallel to those in prior generations, brought on by the combined constraints of environmental degradation, economic volatility and political expectations.[1] As they navigate modernity from a position of occupational

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and cultural rootedness, they embrace the idea of emigrating to Kazakhstan as a way of securing an ongoing pastoral future.

Interestingly, China is willing to let them go, while Kazakhstan is actively beckoning to the worldwide Kazak diaspora to return to the ethnic motherland. The China Kazaks, though seemingly a collective chess piece in global politics, could inadvertently be a useful harbinger of new values for integrating humans and the environment. Pastoralists have been misunderstood for too long and have suffered many losses in the 20th century due to parcelization of land, marginalization to less fertile land and coerced settlement. These very issues are among the reasons China Kazaks are attracted to leaving for Kazakhstan, where they believe they will have the freedom to migrate with their livestock.

Central Asian peoples, including Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks and more became segregated into 'stans' and ethnic 'minorities' in the course of early 20th century world history. Not only were new borders drawn that separated families and tribal units, but grazing lands and migration routes of the nomadic populations were bifurcated and altered to fit inside new nation states. This split some Kazaks off in Mongolia, others in Russia, China and Kazakhstan. Throughout the 20th century, nomadic Kazaks, as well as Mongolians and Kyrgyz, endured great changes in their environment and animal husbandry practices. The Soviets implemented rigorous sedentarization beginning in the 1930s, bringing many Kazaks under the ***sovkhoz*** and ***kolkhoz*** ideological model of production, while allowing for a continuation of some livestock migration (Alimaev and Behnke, 2008). In Kazakhstan, this societal upheaval was succeeded by new restructuring after the dissolution of the Soviet Union that radically reduced the livestock populations (Kerven et al., 2006). The dissolution also contributed to a significant population decline throughout the 1990s, mainly brought on by ethnic Russians leaving Kazakhstan (O'Hara and Gentile, 2009; UNDP, 2006). Nomadic activity and even pastoralism were all but eliminated in Kazakhstan. Yet the government today actively promotes its national image with horses and pastures, and chose the yurt gable as its predominant symbol on the national flag.

China Kazaks were spared the ruthless 'no sheep left behind' practices of mid-century Communist rule as happened in the Soviet Union, but have recently come under new forms of economic and ecological duress from their own central and local governments. Reality, for those Kazaks in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region who choose to herd sheep and maintain livestock, keeps getting smaller. They are subject to geographical enclosures at a macro and micro level. These enclosures first began in the 1950s, but have become more stringent and inescapable in the recent decade, mirroring general trends in Xinjiang.

Organized by counties, townships and villages, pastoral families move in family units, but also as jurisdictional units. This had allowed for some ongoing flexibility in time and date, with room to negotiate for pasture

usage. In the 1980s, the *liyongzheng* (grassland utilization certificate) system granted families individual summer grazing pastures for personal use, to the exclusion of others, except by negotiation. With the beginning of economic reforms and an emphasis on provincial level economic development (read: revenue generation), land grabs and other forms of land title disenfranchisement have become common. These include, for example, persuasion of the title-holding nomad by a local government official to give up the certificate when mining interests want the land controlled by the certificate (Cerny, 2008). Most recently, new enclosures are appearing in the forms of fences, most erected under the *tuimu huancao* policy, starting in 2005.

Coupled with the increasingly severe degradation of the grazing lands in both winter and summer pastures of recent years, which itself had been exacerbated by locusts, rodents and unfavourable weather conditions, the quality of pasturage for the livestock has become a grave concern across counties to Kazak nomads, government officials and scientists alike. What is the most important factor to the success of nomadic activity – the widest possible flexibility of grazing options – is no longer the norm for pastoral Kazaks in Xinjiang.

Furthermore, this tightening of access to high quality and sufficient quantity grazing land has led to direct economic impacts for the families. Thinner sheep fetch lower prices, while the market is flooded with supply when nomads need or want to reduce flock sizes at certain times of the year. The next year the families add more sheep to make up in volume for the lower prices per head, knowing that this is unsustainable. As the cost of living in China has been going up rapidly, even in this remote western province, the cash income for herding families has decreased under the impact of market forces. Politically, ecologically and economically, in recent years many families find themselves caught in a vicious cycle contributing to their own destitution. It is all the more traumatic for families since this is the bust that followed several boom years where demand for meat in the cities had led to escalating prices and profits for them. Herding families expected their incomes to keep rising over time, yet this did not happen.

This has forced heads of household and entire extended families to employ new strategies for survival, seriously weighing up whether to continue migrations and herding or stop altogether, to succumb to the pressures to sedentarize, or to consider the one-way option of emigrating to Kazakhstan on the *oralman* programme. They face very tough choices indeed.

Based on my research with pastoral Kazaks (henceforth ‘China Kazaks’) in Xinjiang,[2] I argue that although the Kazakhstan emigration opportunity is an important new option for these Kazaks to choose a sustainable future, it contains at least the same level of risk as their life in China – and additional constraints. The Chinese state’s rhetoric of bringing modernity (sedentarization and farming) to the ‘backward’ regions of the country is proven misguided when China Kazaks would rather choose the devil they don’t know than the devil they do. Interestingly, the rhetoric from Kazakhstan’s

government matches the hopes for the future in the minds of the China Kazaks far more closely than that of China's central government.

Lured by the promise of free health and education services, the mirage of greener grass and plentiful land on which to graze their livestock, the China Kazaks have been undertaking a cross-border permanent migration for the first time since the short-lived exodus in the early 1960s. They believe that Kazakhstan is somewhat of a promised land, delivering them from the exhausted soils of their counties and removing the yoke of Chinese cultural coercion. My interviews confirm that they have only a vague understanding of the ground level reality across the border. This imagined reality is mostly anecdotally known to the families in China, usually by word of mouth from stories told by émigré family members back to visit, potentially supplemented by snippets of media information. Not only the *oralman* programme, but the very concepts and opportunities for immigration into Kazakhstan have captured the imagination of many Kazaks living in Xinjiang. I show in my discussion of the *oralman* programme and the recent conditions in Xinjiang how this desire has been fuelled, and also how the emigration opportunity does little to solve the ongoing problems ensuing from grassland degradation or the risk of poverty among livestock herding Kazaks in both countries.

Methods

This article is based on doctoral and pre-doctoral research conducted in Xinjiang and greater China between 2004 and 2007. The aim of the research was to understand the ecological sustainability parameters of grasslands when being used with nomadic methods of animal husbandry, and to understand the Kazaks who use them on their own terms as they negotiate their own modernity. As often happens in research, a very interesting phenomenon came to my attention during the seasons of my work: there were many people, young and old, male and female, who expressed a strong desire to emigrate to Kazakhstan. For a population that was locally mobile in predictable and replicated patterns, but was otherwise politically locked in and economically hamstrung, this was a surprisingly bold intention.

Here, I portray some of the people behind the expressed desire to leave China. I extract several stories from my fieldwork that are illustrative of the points I am making about the mirage of Kazakhstan as the promised land. Originally undertaken as fieldwork in Tekesi, Muli, Tuoli and Fuyun counties of northern Xinjiang, my principal methods were structured and semi-structured interviews as well as participant observation. Some data was collected through extended stays in summer pastures, some through short multi-day visits. To expand the story into what the reality of emigration to Kazakhstan actually looks like, without visiting Kazakhstan and without Russian-speaking ability, I rely primarily on textual analysis, mainly of governmental, non-governmental and institutional documents in English.

What struck me in the conversations over time and across the region were the similarities. Young women and old men spoke with equal conviction that moving to Kazakhstan was not only the answer, but was going to solve all their problems, and life would be good. The principle differences in outlook were mainly attributable to the geographical separation; the distance of the speaker's location to the border crossings with Kazakhstan.

Thus, interviewees in the Yili prefectural counties just a few hours to the east of Kazakhstan spoke of this option most frequently and convincingly, while those in Fuyun County in the northern most Altai prefecture, closer to Mongolia, were less likely to raise the topic or answer my questions affirmatively. Those in Muli County, further away into the interior of Xinjiang, although quite ecologically and economically impoverished, were also far less likely to have intentions or plans to emigrate away from their situation. By the same token, families in Tuoli County, a county adjacent to Kazakhstan, were quite likely to have such plans, and like families in the Yili counties, were also likely to know someone or have a family member already in Almaty or elsewhere in Kazakhstan.

The promised land? What it means to be an '*oralman*'

The states in Central Asia have been in a state of flux since the early 1990s with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Soviet Socialist Republic model. What ensued was not only an economic freefall, but also the beginning of a long search for cultural identity and re-identification on the world's stage. While each new nation scrambled to assert itself according to its dominant ethnic identifier: Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazak, Turkmen, Tajik, etc., each also began grappling with the new significance of its own borders and the diaspora of its ethnic cousins.

Nowhere is this truer than Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan, though the ninth largest country in the world by geographical area, boasts a population of just over 15 million today. The already modest population size became a cause for concern to domestic demographers and government officials in the mid-1990s. With the exodus of ethnic Russians out of Kazakhstan, the new republic lost 2 million people or 12 per cent of its total population between 1993 and 1999. The loss of population was detrimental, because it presented not only a brain drain of scientists and highly educated citizens, but because it created additional gaps in the labour force (UNDP, 2006).

This reality concurrently encountered a massive cultural revival of the notion of 'Kazakness'. The Kazak intelligentsia, long in the second-class citizen role to the Russian elites, seized its chance to proclaim the greatness of the ethnic Kazak people, and sought to manifest this strength through influence over language policies and new immigration laws (Sancak, 2007; Sarsembayev, 1999). Strong nationalism led to what Diener (2005) called a dichotomous agenda, where nationalistic activity simultaneously promoted

in-migration of Kazaks from the greater diaspora and the strengthening of Kazak culture elsewhere through relationship building (while not encouraging migration); economic considerations collided with the enthusiasm and vision for a strong nation of Kazakhstan.

This proved a fertile soil for the *oralman* policy to take root. The term '*oralman*' is derived from a Kazak verb meaning to repatriate or reunite. Created as a way of strengthening the position of Kazaks as the majority in power in the fledgling nation, it also had a proactive goal of regaining the population lost to the exodus of former citizens. That is to say, Kazakhstan maintains the *oralman* as an official programme and policy measure designed to attract ethnic Kazaks living in other countries for immigration, and to support them with housing, education and other benefits once they arrive.

The 'ethnic immigration' policy welcomed the returnees – the ethnic Kazaks living in the diaspora including Mongolia, China, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Turkey and other countries (Labor, 2006). President Nursultan Nazarbaev first alluded to this policy in a 1992 speech, first enacted it into law in 1997 and it has since been modified several more times (Kazakhstan, 2002; 2004; 2005; Kazakhstan, 2007).

The *oralman* draw worked. According to Syroezhkin (2009), between 1993 and 2005, 300,000 people returned from several neighbouring countries (this includes those granted residency as well as citizenship). Among those were 3,907 Chinese Kazaks who had assumed Kazakhstani citizenship in 2005 (Syroezhkin, 2009). The portion of China Kazaks among total immigrants is relatively small, but increased throughout the last decade. While in 2002, there were a reported 4,293, by 2006, there were 37,788 people, according to several Ministry of Labour sources (Sadovskaya, 2007). UNDP, in their comprehensive *Oralman* report placed the total number of all *oralman* immigrants at 464,000 people (UNDP, 2006) Another figure points to a total of 651,299 *oralman* immigrants between 1991 and 2007 (Kusku, 2008).

One key feature, but also sticking point, is the *oralman* quota system, which offers housing benefits, travel costs, employment and education integration assistance to those who fall within the quota (IRIN, n.d.; NBCA, 2006). Two state officials personally confirmed that those who are within the quota are also eligible for leased and even free land. Depending on the district, this may be up to 10,000 hectares to which each family could gain access.[3] The policy and the quota system have been very popular, though there are many more returnees that fall outside the quota, and there have been no benefits paid out except within the quota. For example, the UNDP report on the *Status of Oralmans* (2006) explicitly stated, 'To date, the majority of government allocation for *oralman* integration has been spent on housing for those included in the quota. Conversely, those not included in the quota receive no assistance in finding temporary or permanent accommodation.' Some returnees even found themselves counted as stateless if they gave up their previous citizenship without being extended the Kazakhstani citizenship (IRIN, n.d.).

The complexity added to the mix by the fact that the *oralman* policy has a quota system, which has historically been quite low (in the thousands) and a less restrictive open-door policy towards immigration under which many thousands more are accepted, should not be underestimated. One estimate shows that in 2001 immigration reached fifteen times the government quota for returning families, a total of 9,105 families for that year alone, while the quota was set at 600 (IRIN, n.d). After some years of inadequate quotas, in late 2004, the government enlarged the annual and 'by country' figures by 5,000 per year, but it still does not capture the actual stream of families pouring in. In 2004, only one-fourth, or 2,500 out of 10,000 families in Almaty, were part of the quota system (IRIN, n.d). In 2006, some 1,500 families are reported to have come from China, while the China quota was set for 500 families (NBCA, 2006). The consequence is direct: the majority of the returnees remained ineligible for full economic and educational opportunities (CACI, 2004).

Ethnic Kazaks from other countries have been welcomed as returnees to the motherland through the *oralman* programme, or without it. As bona fide immigrants, they are not turned away at the border. Not being awarded *oralman* status, however, means that there is limited entitlement to *oralman* benefits. This in turn made the whole system prone to corruption 'at every level' (Kusku, 2008).

The demand for the *oralman* programme raises new issues. Not only does this create new problems for Kazakhstan as new arrivals struggle to gain a foothold economically and socially, increasing competition for work and schooling, but it illustrates the disconnection between the legal infrastructure and the grand vision of the newly-formed state under President Nursultan Nazarbaev for Kazakhstan as a nation. The ongoing nature of the demand for entry and the *oralman* quota data suggest that even the primary practical goal of the programme: to recover the population numbers following the departure of large numbers of Russians has not been met effectively. For immigrants from China and elsewhere, who come hoping and expecting land and a revival of their herding activities, one economic stress (not enough grass to fatten the sheep for a good market value) may be replaced by others (no legal rights to grazing land, a need to find employment in unfamiliar settings, etc.), as well as encountering a beholden position to authority figures.

Xinjiang under development

Over the last three decades, China has regularly made the front page news stories, much of it for its double-digit economic growth and dramatic societal changes. China's image abroad has changed, and it continues to revise its self-perception, which in turn becomes manifest in its domestic and foreign policy. China perceived itself as a backward nation for decades in the late 20th century and for centuries in comparison to Western powers. Now enjoying the fruits of economic growth in the eastern provinces, it no longer sees

the nation as backward, but still refers to its own, less economically thriving provinces as backward. The glowing national picture has been punctuated with reporting on the disparities that exist between the thriving eastern coastal provinces and the interior provinces. Poverty alleviation has become a real concern for action, and environmental issues are no longer swept under the rug. Indeed, in its discourse on rural areas, the central government never ceases to create linkages between the social and the environmental well-being of the countryside (Xinhua, 2002; 2007b).[4]

Since 1999, a sweeping plan to 'develop the west' has been a pivotal focus of the central government's activities. This plan ostensibly promotes economic growth and development in the western regions as well as benefitting the population through increased access to economic opportunities, better social mobility options and increased environmental sustainability. Yet, whether referred to as a plan or a programme, scholars point out that 'develop the west' lacks specificity and has already undergone a shift in emphases over the several years since being officially unveiled (Naughton, 2004; Oakes, 2007). 'Develop the west' is at its most objective a wide-sweeping agenda for change to people, landscapes and economies, at best a well-intentioned stimulus package.

Xinjiang is often considered to be at the heart of this development plan. Since 2002, the development of the energy sector has moved full speed ahead through such projects as the famous West-East pipeline (which started operations in December 2004) and an international natural gas pipeline from Kazakhstan to China (completed in December 2005). Mining is increasingly seen as a profitable enterprise (CMF, 2006; CIMG, 2007; XCAN, 2006), attracting investment from domestic as well as foreign sources (Newswire, 2005; Zijin, 2007) in Xinjiang for resources as diverse as coal, gold and molybdenum (EIC, 2006; US Embassy, 1996). Mainstream media and academic literature have both reported on these upward economic trends, as well as on the continuous Han in-migration from more easterly provinces, as a political measure to foster regional stability. Notably, some claim the in-migration is a thinly disguised form of colonization (Bovingdon, 2004; Naughton, 2004).

Impacts of Xinjiang development and grassland policies on China Kazaks

From the outside, it appears that good things are coming to the region. Economic growth will revitalize stagnant industries, providing new opportunities and job diversification to the population. It will continue to boost incomes, for rural and urban people alike. However, things that sound good in news reports often bespeak much deeper, more complex issues in reality. Furthermore, there has been a tendency in the 20th century to highly value economic growth (measured in industrial outputs and the like) and to focus exclusively on this as a measure of positive development. Only in the most recent decades has this belief been influenced by a greater appreciation of the cost to the natural environment and the implications for human society.

Whether 'develop the west' reduces or causes deeper poverty remains to be seen. For Kazak nomads in Xinjiang, changes brought about by new policies have exacerbated their predicament and contributed to their desire to leave China outright.

In a larger study I reported from the remote reaches of Xinjiang about the current reality of Kazak nomads from their perspective, and how it stands for the 'sustainable ecological development' (Chinese government term) of the grasslands, the resource they depend on (Cerny, 2008). This is a population that almost never makes the headlines, yet is directly in the line of impact from economic changes in Xinjiang. Until now, very little research has been done on China Kazaks compared with Tibetans, Uighurs and other minorities and published material related to grasslands and China Kazaks remains limited (Banks and Doman, 2001; Banks, 2002; Banks et al., 2003; Bedunah and Harris, 2002; Benson, 1998; Brown et al., 2008; Finke, 2004; Hamann, 2007; Reynolds, 2006).

There is no doubt that all pastoral Kazaks are in for a change. They know it and they welcome improvements in their lives as much as anyone else. Yet what became apparent in my fieldwork is that alongside remarkable societal change and economic progress, there are some serious concerns about current and intended policy to be weighed in the balance, as they do and will impact Kazaks. Current pastoral conditions are blamed on the current users, but in actuality, the story of degradation has historical roots – in rapid deforestation, overuse of water resources and exploitative agricultural practices (Elvin, 1998; Millward, 2008; Shapiro, 2001; Xinhua, 2002). Further tensions over land use are caused by shadowy manoeuvres in land acquisition that have steadily limited the total agricultural (and pastoral) production areas (Jiang, 2006).

Scientists in Xinjiang and other grassland provinces are aware of the intense environmental conditions that nomads must deal with, and the increasing severity of the hazards. While Chinese scientific papers have often been little more than an extension of the official government line, in recent years, more and more researchers have been publishing their findings with notable candour. Some are earnestly grappling with the penetrating issues of land degradation in the grassland and alpine terrains in northern Xinjiang and the greater Central Asian grassland expanses. In the comprehensive studies of Asian pastoral resources for the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations), Hu and Zhang (2002) admit that desertification, at least, is a result of multiple causes: deforestation contributing the most at 32 per cent, overgrazing responsible for 29 per cent and over-cultivation of grassland resulting in 23 per cent of the problem. They also believed that closing off grasslands to help them recover, while providing fenced in areas to individual families and encouraging 'artificial pastures' (alfalfa and hay, primarily) are a solution.

Also in pursuit of sustainable grassland management is the work of Yu et al. (1999). They argue for a botanical species derived approach to healthy

grassland coverage and utilization. Parallel to this, local grassland institute research sought to extract more forage from wild botanical species (Guo et al., 2000). Chen (2005) formulates a new way of calculating a stocking density for the pastures in the Altai, which is almost brave in light of the political weight of the massive *tuimu huancao* (TMHC) or Returning Grazingland to Grassland project. More expedient to the aims of the TMHC project is the idea that the grassland, for sustainable animal husbandry purposes, should be categorized into three zones: the 'ecological function region', 'economic function region' and 'mixed function region' (Guo et al., 2004), which are similar to the grazing prohibition, temporary grazing ban and rotational grazing divisions created by TMHC. More recently Wu and Du (2008), in their work on Inner Mongolian grasslands, finally alter course in the debate and argue outright for the abolishment of private grassland usage rights and fencing; for they run amok of the natural parameters inherent to grassland ecosystems. As one of the lone voices in the (Chinese) wilderness, they advocate a return to nomadism as the appropriate way to efficiently utilize the grassland natural resource.

The Returning Grazingland to Grassland project, or *tuimu huancao,* is quietly being rolled out in Xinjiang, Tibet and elsewhere in grassland provinces. The project is most closely but awkwardly translated in English as 'turning grazingland into grassland'. It also circulates in translation as 'retiring pasture to restore grassland' and more misleadingly 'return pasture to grass'. It was announced in November 2002 and its first five-year implementation was from 2003–2007. According to a local news article, the initial target was to 'fence off and re-seed 1 billion *mu* (67 million hectares) of grassland in the period 2003–2007' (CDB, 2003). It is this project which currently most directly impacts the lives and livelihoods of nomads in Xinjiang. Its scope includes massive fencing efforts, geospatial data capture, and the permanent settlement of the Kazaks and other nomadic ethnic minorities. Its title suggests a purely ecologically-minded project, which like 'grain for green', a prior environmental campaign in China, has positive social benefits for rural populations. It is different from 'grain for green' in that it does have an ulterior social motive. *Tuimu huancao* lays the groundwork for settlement of China's remaining nomadic populations. It is deleterious to the native wildlife, many species of which also have migration cycles that become disrupted by the fencing. It has been unclear whether it will benefit the grasslands. The known risks and failures of fencing elsewhere in China (Bauer, 2005; Williams, 2002; Wu and Du, 2008; Yeh, 2005) would suggest that fencing will do more harm than good as an environmental protection tool.

Perception of and reaction to 'backwardness'

At the root of this resource management paradigm is what Blaikie and Muldavin (2004) call the 'rationalist expert-led' model of 'truth' and 'science'

serving a larger political aim. This approach has been top-down and uncritical of the long-term and potentially negative effects of development measures on people. Technological innovations are treated as the solution, when in fact this is inappropriate for the grassland in China and underscores the inconsistencies within resource management regimes at various government levels (Brown et al., 2008). ***Tuimu huancao*** and earlier grassland fencing have been specifically implemented to control people under the guise of environmental protection (Bauer, 2005; Yeh, 2005). These restrictive policies have been a function of the Han Chinese sensitivity about the 'backwardness' of its people. It is a veritable historical characteristic of Chinese planning: policies are created based on deeply-rooted beliefs in an evolutionary model whereby the mainstream Han culture is at the top of the scale, where pastoralism is 'backward' and ethnic minorities in general need help to become civilized, and sedentarized agriculture represents a hallmark of development (Daily, 2000; Xinhua, 2007a) if not modernization (Harrell, 1995; Longworth and Williamson, 1993; Longworth, 1995). In Chinese official thinking there is no place for the idea of a multiplicity of historical trajectories.

In the early years of the reform era which began in 1978, the central government was sensitive about the backwardness of the whole country relative to the rest of the world. After the dramatic growth in prosperity of the eastern provinces, the focus shifted to the less developed cities and areas of the central and western provinces. Sometimes this is framed by the central government's rhetoric as the entire region being 'backward' – including technology and industry (State Council, 2003), sometimes it refers only to the population, or segments of the population (Halik and Yang, 2006). ***Luohou*** is the Chinese word for 'backward' and being a frequent concept in the Chinese media it is at the forefront of people's minds. During my fieldwork, I found many people in Xinjiang to be self-conscious about it, embarrassed at times, and even referred to themselves and their region as ***luohou***. This was true of office workers, police officers, and government officials as well as ordinary citizens. Yet, even if they see themselves as lacking relative to people in eastern provinces, the urban citizens in turn see the nomads as more backward still.

In each series of interviews with Kazak nomads, I found two distinct lines of thinking: some had internalized the idea that they were backward or lower on some perceived scale of human worthiness, while others expressed a fierce pride in the distinction of being Kazak. This came to the fore particularly in questions about intermarriage with other ethnic groups and questions about the future. For the nomads who participated in the interviews I conducted over several periods in four counties, what is at stake is their ability to express their culture through choice of livelihood, and the very future of being Kazak in Xinjiang.

With over a million speakers and a robust presence in the media, their language is not imminently threatened. But with the environmental pressures, the TMHC fencing policies and the overt intentions to settle the nomads into

villages, their livelihoods and cultural identity are threatened. The nomads' perception of what development entails is based on a very basic premise. That premise is that they own livestock, and they live in accordance with the needs of their livestock so that their numbers may increase. Their livestock are the basis of the household income, the family's main source of cash flow and the security for next year and every year beyond that.[5] Therefore, they must align themselves with the optimal conditions for thriving herds and flocks.

All of the above conditions contribute to the phenomenon at the heart of this paper, that China Kazaks are welcoming the available exit strategy to Kazakhstan as a way to continue living in line with their values. The social forces at work are subtle and persistent, while the overt external factors are the dire environmental conditions in the seasonal pastures back in China.

Kazak nomads' attitudes towards grazing land, livelihoods and emigration to Kazakhstan

The nomads, though they see themselves as part of a greater cross-regional Kazak population (this being a function of having been educated to see themselves as a *minzu* or nationality in China), act on a very specific, localized basis. They articulate a culture which is place-based, as well as seasonally and geographically determined. They do not consider migrating to another county, or outside of their home province to improve their fortunes, though certainly they have been exposed to this widespread phenomenon in recent years of rural-urban and interprovincial migration in China through the media. They currently have grazing rights assigned to them through *liyongzheng* or grassland utilization contracts which are legally binding, national level documents. Unfortunately, they are sometimes defrauded, recently often pressured to sell off their rights and even in the best cases, the land allocated through these contracts is no longer enough. The documents were issued in the early 1980s to a generation of adults who have since seen their children grow up and form their own families. The older and the younger generations thus share the land specified in the contract, as no new land is being allocated this way. As each male head of household needs a certain number of sheep to support his family, this puts additional sheep counts on the same plot of land, and thus additional pressures on the vegetation and soil which in many cases are already unable to recover from the previous year's grazing. Due to the depressed prices for sheep, families have faced tremendous economic stresses for several years in a row, which lead them to act within a narrowly defined range of options. A few of these options: maximizing natural cycles, negotiation of grassland usage rights with other families, settlement into villages with fixed plots of land, and switching to new professions, are summarized briefly here.

The nomads continue to maximize their sheep management by adjusting the timing on sheep breeding (through techniques taught through the government Animal Husbandry extension units) and taking advantage of timing in the seasonal cycles (for example earlier spring or earlier snows). Where families have strong social leverage through status in the community or an extensive lineage, negotiating access to more grass is a favoured strategy for immediate relief to underfed livestock.

Settlement has been promoted by the Chinese central government for a long time due to their own cultural biases; recent years have seen an increase in both voluntary and less than voluntary settlement. Settlement usually entails a brand new set of mud-brick or concrete houses for the families in the previously migrating village unit (Zukovsky, 2007). With this option, they are encouraged to become farmers and maintain sheep in a penned location or leave herding altogether to open a restaurant, drive a taxi and other such small business livelihoods.

For some younger people, their parents' seasonal migratory lifestyle is no longer attractive, as they see it as too hard and uncomfortable a lifestyle, especially if they have attended schools in towns or urbanized areas. There is a natural shift towards settlement in the younger generation. Equally palpable in the community consciousness is the resistance to giving up seasonal migrations entirely and a fear of being landless, by losing the one piece of land they do have control over, specified in their grassland utilization contract.

The attachment to grazing land and their ethnic heritage as nomads or wide ranging pastoralists became one of two key factors they expressed in interviews for the desire to move to Kazakhstan. The principal reason is that they know Kazakhstan is a large and sparsely inhabited country (in stark contrast to China) and they believe they will be given, or gain access to, large tracts of grazing land. Not only that, but the men's attitudes and responses indicate a belief that their problems of overgrazing, soil erosion and insufficient nutritional value of the grasslands will disappear (because their herds will be able to spread out over the land).

The second factor is to provide a better future for their children. In some cases, the family has seen one or more members of the extended family emigrate, and they rely on this person to help them emigrate successfully and settle into life in Kazakhstan. This social attachment was expressed clearly by some interviewees in Tuoli and also in Tekesi, both of which are adjacent counties to the Kazakhstan border regions.

What is interesting about the second factor is that in earlier decades, these particular counties may have been nothing more than sleepy backwaters near a fortified border region. Most of Xinjiang was closed entirely to foreigners until recent years. The dynamics of increasingly open trade, economic development and tourism with the newly emerged Central Asian states have changed everything. The presence of Kazakhstan as the strongest player among the Central Asian republics in particular, is having an impact inside Xinjiang. There is a perception of greater freedom of choice being available

to Kazaks in Kazakhstan. This perception of greater freedom is not to be discounted, as the examples of the very real constraints and enclosures that the nomads encounter at home will illustrate.

Below, I include quotes from interviews across several counties that show the range of opinions on contemporary problems as well as solutions the nomads consider relevant. Thereafter, I include more in-depth stories of two families with plans for emigration to Kazakhstan.[6] In one family, one of the sons has already resettled in Almaty and in the other the young father has strong motivations to move as an attempt to improve circumstances for his children. They illustrate the very emotional basis of their vision for the future of their families. The range of quotes is intended to illustrate the thoughtfulness and the quiet desperation of being a pastoral Kazak in Xinjiang.

The pervasive ecological and economic problems faced by the nomads come to a head in the issue of settlement, which is the government's secondary plan of action to address the environmental problem faced by the users, without due consideration of what new environmental problems livestock *im*mobility will cause. At an ethical level, settlement is a form of social coercion. It overrides the wishes of a population that has expressed mixed feelings about giving up a mobile lifestyle, despite its ongoing hardships.

Settlement was an easy topic to discuss with the nomads. The answers I received covered the whole spectrum from absolute refusal to complete willingness. Since I almost always interviewed the head of household, and that was almost always a man, my results are skewed by the male perspective. Just a few of them gave an interesting dual perspective such as, 'my wife wants to settle down. She is tired of packing everything and moving every few days. As for me, this is the only work I know, and I want to keep doing it'.

In the first quotes, the nomads are being interviewed in their winter homes, while in the later quotes the nomads are in their summer yurts. To reflect the variety in responses, I have included multiple quotes from the interviews. I have highlighted in bold the main issue in each quote for greater ease in reading.

Nomad perspectives on settlement (winter residences)

> If I could change something about my life, I would want **to live near the city,** to be able to settle down permanently, and **send my children to school** to learn skills and gain knowledge to improve their abilities. This is the only way for them to have a better life. If I continue to raise livestock, my desire would be that we would have enough feed and fodder to raise animals in pens. (Male, age 45)

> I spent 38 years living as a nomadic herder; nothing ever changed. I never saw any new changes. I would like to stop being a nomad, I don't always want to be so exhausted. [I would like] to **settle down permanently**, to have some land, and to give my children a steady life. …The

young people want to develop; they don't want to continue herding. But if you want to gain knowledge and learn skills you **need money** as a foundation, and now the cost of raising sheep is more than the income from them. The small number of livestock that we possess does not enable us to do the other things we want to do. (Male, age 48)

The nomadic herding profession does not make us very wealthy. For generations we have been making our living by herding livestock. Our children have to go to school but still cannot find any other kind of work, and they have **no land to farm**. These days nobody knows how to meet their basic needs. The number of the poor is continually increasing. The government encourages us try to become wealthy. But the herdsmen haven't seen [the government] do anything that has been of benefit to them. (Male, age 64)

Wild animals are the creatures that originally existed in nature, so we have no complaint against the wildlife. But we have been **making our living by raising livestock for generations.** And if we are **forced** to give up our livestock and grazing land, we will have no other source of livelihood. (Male, age 60)

In 1970 I started working as a doctor in the herding unit. My family members went to herd. [discussion of several jobs, his education, and his physical condition] … I would like to open a restaurant but I have no money. I would like to farm, but I have no land. I want to work, but I have no job. If I take out a loan and there is no harvest in the fall, then I won't be able to pay it back. **So these days there is a saying: most people today who are raising livestock are raising them for the bank. (**Male, age 52)

I would like to get rich, but herding is impoverishment. At present **the water and grass are being degraded**, and it is not easy to raise livestock. We are only able to feed and clothe ourselves. (Male, age 67)

We have no land. In order to have a better life, of course we would like to raise more livestock. But if we had more livestock, there would be no extra grassland. (Male, age 55)

My husband is a driver for someone else. His monthly salary is somewhere between 1,000–1,500 yuan [at the time of interveiw between USD $121–181] ... we own some livestock, but not a large number. ... working as herders has no future. The price of sheep is so low, and we can't make any money, **we already live at the most basic level.** Being dependent on such a small number of cattle and sheep, on such a small plot of land, and on my husband's small salary, **what hope there to speak about?** (Female, age 23)

> Fencing is okay … as long as they **keep open the migration routes** which the herders use to pass through. (Male, age unknown)
>
> **I have been thinking about this for a long time.** There is no longer any future in continuing to herd. Sheep are not worth much right now. If I were not a nomad, I still would have no land to farm. You tell me what to do! … I have already mentioned this previously. What would we be able to do? If [our] land is taken over, what will we do? It is not such an easy thing to settle down permanently. (Male, age 43)
>
> There is no solution besides **enabling us** to settle down permanently … at present we are on the horns of a dilemma. When we devote ourselves to herding alone, there is not enough grassland. If we devote ourselves to farming, there is no land for that either. What on earth shall we do? (Male, age 50)

Nomad perspectives on settlement (summer residences)

> There is **no reason to settle down**. The migration is what is special about our way of life. (Male, age 39)
>
> If they could **settle one household** in the family, then it would help all the rest of the members of the big family. (Male, age 61)
>
> **If the grass was better**, **we had more land,** we could sell more sheep at better prices, that would be a better life. (Male, age 45)
>
> **If they could change anything about their lives, to settle down would be a help.** Secondly, doing business would be good. **If we could sell our milk products, it would improve our lives. [Asking for examples he elaborates:] camel or horse milk, other dairy; in this way we could increase our standard of living. Third, by going to the big city to work. [I could] work at the animal market or in the slaughterhouse**. (Male, age over fifty)
>
> **The government encourages us to settle down. There are lots of nomads who can't get used to being farmers. Some people are afraid to change from nomads to farmers. There are some people who have tried to be farmers. To settle is a new kind of lifestyle for them.** We have our own way of life, our own way of making a living and an income. **This origin is in selling the dairy products, like camels' milk, cream, [and meat]. [If] we can also rent other people's cows, we can make even more cream. At the moment, since we make only just enough for themselves, we can't sell any. If we rented more cows, we could make more cream, and we could sell the surplus**. (Male, age unknown)

It is true that many expressed a desire or a willingness to settle, yet their anxieties run high. They are worried about the costs of a house, the utilities, the

taxes, when they already struggle to pay for the things they need to buy, like flour and salt for themselves, and winter feed for the livestock. They want the best for their children and they stress that they want them to have more education than they themselves had, for which they are willing to shoulder the costs and even settle into a house. Upon closer scrutiny, their main concern is land. They do not have enough now, and what if they settle? They want more land from the government.

Many expressed a desire to stay with a herding lifestyle full-time. The man may venture that it was the only skill he has, but in the same breath say what a great life it is to be out in nature, herding the sheep to find better forage, nurturing a really healthy herd that will sell well and breed well. It is the Kazak way. Also, the meat is delicious and they support their families with the things they make themselves like yogurt, milk and cheese.

At face value, there are more people who favour settlement. But just below the surface of the willingness are the anxieties about how life will go on. It is no accident that several of them asked, ‘what on earth shall we do?’ in this sample. It is a pervasive way of thinking, which is substantiated by the numbers they reported in other parts of the interviews. At sheep sales of 180 yuan per sheep, their household income is in the range of 16–20,000 yuan per year (at the time, USD $1 equalled circa 8.2 yuan, thus a household income between $1,951–2,439 per year). Their costs, which include education and winterfeed for livestock as the two highest costs also come to 16–20,000 yuan. From their perspective, a good livelihood is a function of higher incomes, ***from sheep.*** Very few mention farming directly. Some are in favour, some express dislike for it. Most interviewees expressed a vision where settlement includes their livestock.

The excerpts above show the range of concerns that nomads have, but also the repetitive pattern of stress, and the repeated desire for land. We will settle ***if*** the government gives us land. We are willing to settle, ***and*** we need land for our sheep. If we settle one relative’s family, they can grow the seeds and produce the hay, so that the rest of us can keep herding. What the nomads do not say is that they want to settle because then their lives will get better.

Yirqin and Gulnur

Yirqin, not his real name, has a young family in Tuoli county. I selected his family because the children are very young and the father expresses the deep concern he has for the education of his children in such a way that reflects the interviews I had with almost all families. In several days of conversations, he proved very thoughtful about his options. His views exemplified the economic tensions and hope, versus the hopelessness that nomadic Kazaks feel about their situation in recent years. In particular, the will to continue being nomadic is informed by grassland conditions and sale prices of sheep but plays itself out in education.

Yirqin at the time of our interviews had a three year old daughter and a newborn son. He wants both of them to attend school easily and complete their education. He is a sharp young man and asks frequent questions of his interviewer about the world at large. His wife is busy from before sunrise until after dark with housework and the dairying activities around the robust herd of 15 cows. He helps with childminding but watches while she cooks, cleans and scurries about. He has more time in the summer to relax than in other seasons, and he does so. In addition, he sold off some of his flock of sheep in early summer, to take advantage of the growing market for more tender lamb meat, and to reduce the impact on his available grazing land. This leaves him with a smaller flock to tend to, while he and his wife have expanded the herd of cows, so she has higher than average duties. He also shares usage of higher altitude grazing land with members of his family, some of whom have their summer pastures just over and down the next ridge. All of these factors demonstrate him to be a man who calculates his options and makes strategic decisions to take advantage of the best ones available.

Looking over at his daughter while we talk, he says he wants to move to Kazakhstan soon, and expects to start the process within two years. He had not begun the lengthy bureaucratic process yet, but he had made up his mind to do so. The reason: education and healthcare are free in Kazakhstan. The cost of educating the children is a huge burden on household finances for nomadic families. Even with subsidies, the children need uniforms, books, room and board at the school.[7] Where they live, she can attend Kazak language schools, but the pressure in Xinjiang for ethnic minorities to attend Chinese language schools is increasing year by year, an aspect Yirqin is not amenable to.

The Kazaks worry as much as the Uighurs, a linguistically related ethnic minority in Xinjiang, about the loss of language and cultural traditions for their people.[8] All this worrying about schooling choices and paying for them will stop, he believes, when they emigrate. It will certainly be easier to raise fat sheep on larger pastures, which he, like other men I spoke to, assumed as a given. In sum, the nomads' perceived solution to the lack of desirable choices regarding both schooling and quality pastures within China is to emigrate to Kazakhstan. Their own language is the reinstated national language and they have heard that the pastures are empty due to disuse.

Gulnur, also not her real name, is a very striking woman. Short and stout in stature, she is the mother of 10 children, all of them now grown up. One of her sons emigrated to Kazakhstan and was home for a visit on one occasion, sporting a high quality leather jacket and city fashions. Gulnur's husband is a respected figure, having influence with their local leaders and their county town of Fuyun. The other sons herd livestock, and because of their good connections, the family has been able to secure additional grazing land and swap a less favourable plot with a higher altitude, higher quality meadow plot. Interacting with them over three seasons, I was privileged to witness several scenes. In the spring, much excitement about the coming summer

season in the mountains. In the summer, shock and worry because of a fight in the middle of the night with the neighbours over access to grazing rights for sheep herds that left Gulnur's husband, a man of over 60, in need of hospitalization in town some forty miles away, down slope. Finally, in the winter, the youngest of the daughters, who had been Gulnur's helpers with the work at the summer yurt, were busy with the family's new restaurant in town. Having been sent for cook training in the city for a few months, they were now back to help supplement the family income.

In this family, diversification of skills was a primary asset. Having both several sons and several daughters meant that the sons could take on different roles: two to do the herding for the entire family, sometimes with the father, and two to do the fodder production and hay-making on agricultural land provided in a nearby village. The daughters had married out or were helping the family with wage-producing labour during the non-migratory winter season when the parents stayed at their little house in town. As is customary, the labour of the parents is supplanted by that of their children as they get older.

The family is a vital social unit that helps nomads to survive both ecologically and economically. The family unit is an inherent systemic advantage, exercised on a daily basis to negotiate difficult economic and political situations in the Xinjiang reality. Gulnur and her husband Serik have better options than most, due to their 10 children spreading out across geographical space and professions, and providing services and cash flow to the well-being of the entire family. The son in Kazakhstan is already enlisted in making way for more family members to join him. Ten children are unusual though in today's pastoral families.

Current young families, where the average is three children, face a very different set of economic and political circumstances from the last generation of young parents. This task is daunting. They are in a less favourable position than ever to gain political clout with their local government, as Serik, Gulnur's husband, was able to do in communist times. With political pressures of their own and better communication systems today, local-level government officials are less likely to turn a blind eye or work out special conditions for their mandates.

Yirqin, the young father in Tuoli county, had plans to move in about two to three years, since they did not yet have their paperwork, the passports, exit permission and so forth. He had already considered that he will need to sell all his animals and household goods, and was actively asking around among his contacts about what happens on the other side and how he can buy new livestock at a fair price in Kazakhstan. In other conversations he mentioned how he had heard the quality of education was much better in Kazakhstan's schools, and anyway, he was sure that it was completely free of charge for all grades. He thinks he knows what to expect from life in China for the foreseeable future, and he has seen the results among his peers. Looking out on his

pastures, he also has learned from his experiences of the last few years that being a pastoralist in Xinjiang is going to get worse before it gets better.

The resistance to farming that Yirqin shares with many in his age group, seeks an escape hatch in the idea of moving to Kazakhstan in the future. Arduous and potentially costly, the reward for the journey if taken is the freedom to remain nomadic, sweetened with a cherry of more and better land and the belief that education is significantly better than what they currently have available to them.[9] He and many other nomads believe that they will be provided with large tracts of land for summer pastures, and since there is virtually no competition, the livestock will finally have copious meadows to graze again.

One final notion that found frequent expression across interviews was the idea that 'we are brothers', meaning themselves and the Kazaks of Kazakhstan. This made the idea of reuniting in one place in one country unique to Kazaks very appealing. Some families explained how they planned to go over several years while a few families said it was too expensive to go at all. One or two of the former explained their plans to me, how they would sell the livestock, but keep the household goods. One poor family with two adolescents, two grown daughters and an aunt already in Kazakhstan said, 'It does not matter how long it takes us to get there, but we will go to Kazakhstan'. The latter family wants to move to a city, but the majority seems to want to disperse to the rural areas on the other side of the border.

The conditions for emigrants to Kazakhstan

Comparing the expectations of the China Kazaks with the reports of the *oralman* experience for the day to day activities of livestock management, Kazaks until very recently stood to run into some of the same constraints as those which contribute to their economic duress and personal dissatisfaction in China. Migrational herding has seen a resurgence in recent years in Kazakhstan, as range and choice of mobility is largely a factor of flock sizes, where seasonal migration has become cost-effective for large flock owners (Kerven et al., 2006; Kerven et al., 2008). Thus, in theory there may be more grazing land available than in China, but at best it may be years before many immigrating families just starting out have increased flock sizes to make it feasible to undertake migrations. And this is only if they are within the quota and if they really are given land in the oblast they settle in, and their housing needs are adequately met.

Privatization of land and more intense alignment with market economy principles create some of the same distortions and inequities the nomads have witnessed in Xinjiang. Wealthier livestock owners and those with better connections to local government get preferred access to land, especially with favourable water conditions (Kerven, 2003a). Current common practices, as in Xinjiang, include intensive grazing around settlements that contribute to

worrisome overgrazing, and make expensive foddering through winter necessary (Behnke, 2003; Kerven, 2003c; Kerven et al., 2008). Similar hardships resulting from the elimination of collective practices and the inherent heavy government subsidization followed by the privatization of former state enterprises left rural residents in Kazakhstan in the lurch and facing new costs for animal feed and breeding costs (Kerven, 2003a). The constraints that squeeze nomadic Kazaks in recent years in Xinjiang are not missing in Kazakhstan.

China Kazaks whom I interviewed are basing their preference to move on a naïve assumption about land. Land can be available for free, but only when families are accepted under the *oralman* quota. The demand for *oralman* status is far greater than the supply. Although larger areas of Kazakhstan are theoretically open for settlement with a far lower population per square kilometre than in China (and there is no competition for land from in-migrating Han agriculturalists from other provinces), land use in Kazakhstan has its stains from the past. The pastures in Kazakhstan suffered their own years of severe degradation through overstocking and it is only very recently that some ecological zones and plant types are showing signs of recovery (Alimaev, 2003).

With striking similarities to the last decade in Xinjiang, the market for sheep in Kazakhstan went through extreme instability in the 1990s and sheep herders were forced to sell off their herds at low prices to gain access to cash and were left drastically impoverished. This in turn left an unlevel playing field with a few wealthy, well positioned landowners and a broad base of pastoralists barely making ends meet from year to year. The reforms that followed led to more intensive village-level grazing (Behnke, 2003). In recent years, though, economic conditions had improved for the whole country, raising incomes also for rural residents (O'Hara and Gentile, 2009). Evidence suggests that herding families are able to apply strategies for increasing their holdings and building their family's wealth (Kerven et al., 2008), but this may reflect opportunities for native-born more than *oralman* Kazaks. It remains to be studied in more comprehensive research how exactly the China Kazak pastoralists who emigrate and become *oralman* fare in their new country.

The conditions of too high livestock densities and economic instability that occurred in Kazakhstan can be compared to the situation created by the TMHC policy and settlement measures that fence off migration routes and reduce China Kazaks to intensive local grazing and a downward spiral of economic hardship.

For all of these reasons above, the freedom to seasonally migrate that is strongly present in the China Kazaks' aspirations for moving to Kazakhstan has been an illusion, while the support system is possibly worse than at home. Xinjiang has pastoral and agricultural extension services, which, although flawed, are available on a regular basis to all nomads. All pastoral counties have Animal Husbandry Bureaux, with a provincial level bureau in Urumqi, the capital, in charge of implementing national policy and managing all livestock-related research and services.

Such services in Kazakhstan are reportedly non-existent or were abruptly discontinued following the formation of the new states in the early 1990s (Kerven et al., 2002). Inconsistency of *oralman*-related policy implementation among levels of government and oblast and corruption (Kusku, 2008) add considerable risk to the immigration plans of incoming families.

Last but not least among the constraints on a sustainable livelihood remains the issue of distance. Being located far from urban markets with limited access to marketing systems has been a pervasive problem for increasing pastoral incomes in China (Cerny, 2008), Kazakhstan (Kerven, 2003b, c) as elsewhere (Davies and Hatfield, 2008; Marin, 2008). In a past study I wrote extensively about the logistical inconsistencies such as poor roads and poor supply chains that contribute to the poverty of nomads, even when they produce high quality sheep and dairy products for sale (Cerny, 2008). The China Kazaks who have become *oralman* are lauded for being more entrepreneurial and more adept at setting up new marketing structures at the village level and in areas where infrastructures collapsed with the demise of the collectivized system (Sancak and Finke, 2005). Yet rural to urban and inter-oblast income discrepancies (O'Hara and Gentile, 2009) as well as tensions with native residents over jobs, degrees of 'Kazakness' and other matters (Diener, 2005; Kusku, 2008; Sancak, 2007) indicate that economic and social instability will be the norm for some time to come.

In addition to the similarities in poor access to land resources and sustained economic instability, the socio-cultural advantages that China Kazaks seek in their desire to move to Kazakhstan are also not supported by reports on *oralman* social integration. First, the 'free' education is plagued by the same problems as rural education in Xinjiang. The schools are in low quality buildings and teaching staff are substandard with low morale (UNDP, 2006). Even just a few years ago, many rural schools had closed or faced constant shortages of materials, staff and heating (IRIN, 2004a). Although China Kazaks speak the newly instated national language, and are freed from the pressure to have their children educated in Chinese language schools, most China Kazaks are used to Arabic-based script while the older generations were taught in Romanized Kazak. Kazak language in Kazakhstan is Cyrillic-based and this has contributed to less than seamless integration of the new immigrants (Diener, 2005; UNDP, 2006). It is true that children entering school in Kazakhstan and younger people will adapt more easily to Cyrillic-based Kazak so that within a generation this gap should be eliminated.

The reunification of the Kazak brotherhood which Kazakhstan aspires to is not coming to fruition easily. The country has fallen short of quickly integrating new immigrants and fostering brotherhood among all Kazaks. New immigrants face a sketchy support system that is inadequate in key areas, not least among them the quota that falls far short of demand, the inconsistent delivery of services, and the lack of services provided to people who get classified outside the quota (UNDP, 2006; Kusku, 2008).

Nations that successfully integrate new immigrants do so with cultural and civic instruction, in addition to language training. China Kazaks, though close in many cultural practices nevertheless lack knowledge of how things are done in Kazakhstan. It causes them to rely on the trial and error method, or their own relatives who have emigrated earlier, and also leaves them vulnerable to abusive and corrupt practices. In short, the lack of preparedness and thoroughness of *oralman* integration leaves China Kazaks to remain as second-class citizens. They may simply be switching one such status for another. Yet, worse still than being treated as second-class citizens is the risk of being classified as stateless. This pertains to persons who have given up their Chinese (or other) citizenship to be granted the right to residency in Kazakhstan, but who are subsequently denied Kazak citizenship (IRIN, 2004b).

Conclusions

The phenomenon of China Kazaks wanting to emigrate to Kazakhstan is born in the present situation of acute economic stress among nomadic families, brought about by ongoing ecological problems, past policies that did not factor in natural reproduction rates and thus did not anticipate the current numbers of families and sheep, and present policies that are counter-productive to thriving pastoral livelihoods and the recovery of the grassland resource.

Extensive interviews in counties of all major pastoral prefectures in northern Xinjiang provide evidence of clear wishes for the future. Settlement is acceptable to some, but they want land to go with it. The men desire livestock-centred occupations in almost all cases, and many wish to keep herding either full-time or at least part-time. Very few accept agriculture as an occupation, while some are amenable to sedentary fodder production as one of the strategies among family members. They associate settlement, agriculture and a stoppage of all migratory activities in the family to be a threat to their cultural identity. They desire to maintain and strengthen their cultural identity, while assimilation into a greater Chinese identity is not acceptable. The combination of all factors – economic, ecological and socio-political – is what has many China Kazaks asserting a desire to leave for Kazakhstan.

Their field of vision – word of mouth is a strong method of communication for them and their access to media continues to expand – remains limited. It is the opinion of this researcher, that although economic conditions have improved in Kazakhstan in the last several years, with education being one sector that may be seeing improvement in the short-term, China Kazaks have suffered from the mirage effect. The grass appeared greener to them from inside China, but moving to Kazakhstan in most cases may not create a solution to their problems. Many of the issues they face in their day-to-day struggles as sheep herding, migratory people, in less than abundant grassland, are consistent with recent reality in Kazakhstan. They are still confronted with the new reality of learning to live in a still rather different culture.

The China Kazaks lack a deeper understanding of the environmental hazards that exist in some rural areas of Kazakhstan, from water shortages to radiation contamination (Agriculture, 2006). They lack an appreciation for the new hardships that await them as they negotiate past bribe-seeking officials, await their turn for housing, and struggle to bring their sheep to market once again. They believe that they will be Kazaks among Kazaks, whereas the evidence suggests they only become second-class citizens again, outcast once more for their 'backwardness' (Sadovskaya, 2007; Sancak, 2007). The Kazakhstan government has the last say in where the *oralman* get placed (Kazakhstan, 2005) and moving from one exhausted grassland to another cannot be seen as a gain. Kazakhstan sees the *oralman* programme as a way to increase its population and restore a Kazak ethnic majority. It is not an environmental management policy, nor part of a greater plan to promote sustainable development of the domestic grassland resources.

Kazakhstan's *oralman* programme is not directly supportive of nomadism, while China's *tuimu huancao* policy is directly and indirectly supportive of settlement. As Davies and Hatfield (2008) succinctly state, 'few governments are ready to tolerate mobile livestock production and many pursue explicit or inadvertent policies of settlement'. What remains to be seen are the integration of sound science in the formulation of differentiated, sustainable policies, and the governments' acknowledgement of the suitability of a pastoral livelihood to the vast stretches of land they have unsuccessfully converted or attempted to convert for agriculture and intensive development. That is to say, a political agenda currently supersedes sound land management as a priority of policy making and governance in both countries.

Despite all of these caveats, the centrepiece of this story is that the China Kazaks are willing to face all risks and venture into the unknown because they are so certain they have more to gain by leaving than by staying. Given the options available to them at home, they would rather pack up their household goods one more time and cross a border. Faced with the upcoming settlement into villages as part of the development schemes for Xinjiang, they seek a different future. Looking down at the vegetation stubble in the summer pastures that were waist high and copious in their living memories, they feel at a loss. Rather than giving up on herding and moving to town, they prefer to apply for exit papers and move to Kazakhstan, where they have heard the grass is greener.

As so often with the nomads of the world, they do their best to cope with the reality around them, while so much of that reality remains stacked against them.

Notes

1. There was a prior exodus by Kazaks out of China in 1962 and there are periodic winter calamities called *dzud*, but while the former was political and the latter

are environmental, neither is a coming together of both political and ecological constraints, as in this current situation.

2. I interviewed families in Yili Prefecture and Mulei counties in 2004, and Tuoli and Fuyun counties in 2006–2007. In all cases I was accompanied by an assistant whose main responsibility was translation from Kazak to Chinese. In 2004, I conducted short-term visits to summer pastures. With permissions in hand, I lived on location with different families during spring and summer of 2006 to better observe the social rhythms and livestock. I also supervised a nomadic survey done on behalf of a Smithsonian wildlife project in early winter 2006–2007 in Fuyun County.
3. Personal communication with Kazakhstan ministry level officials during a visit to Seattle, May 2008.
4. Items from these sources translated into English as 'developing agriculture by relying on science, technology and education in the countryside, and realizing sustainable development.' Or, more opaquely: 'every means to find a sustainable agricultural development mode that cannot only increase the output of grain and other farm produce, but also help improve the ecological environment' have been a mainstay of central government reports.
5. Families have very strong social bonds. Individuals or sub-units of the larger family that are prospering will come to the aid of family members who need money. More and more, family members also draw income from employment. This is particularly true of young people, who pursue a range of wage-based activities when they are available locally.
6. I have renamed them Yirqin and Gulnur to protect their identities.
7. In recent decades, many nomadic children have been educated in town-based boarding schools while their parents migrate with the livestock. The families are reunited during the summer holidays.
8. Education is a hot iron in Xinjiang in the past decade, as education policy has seen the imposition of new restrictions and the closure of ethnic language classes. Even ethnic minority faculty teaching a class of exclusively ethnic minority students are required to teach in Chinese. Parents of young children debate whether to send their offspring to Chinese school to increase their professional chances later, while evidence from families of Chinese school-educated young adults show that a dramatic loss of native language skills occurs, including both speaking and writing skills. Both the parents and the young people themselves affirmed this in interviews. I also learned to pick my assistants very carefully, because urban educated Kazaks did not necessarily have fluent enough speaking and reading skills in Kazak language.
9. I was able to interview one family packed and on the move to Kazakhstan. It was costing them 2,000 yuan (about USD $244 in 2006) to move from Fuhai county.

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